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THE LOTUS MAGAZINE

CENTENARY OF LISZT'S BIRTH

By Gustav Kobbé



THE Liszt centenary falls in this month, Franz Liszt having been born at Raiding, near Odenburg in Hungary, October 22, 1811. From early boyhood, when he was a musical prodigy, until his death at Bayreuth, in July 1886, he was a striking figure in the world of music. If Sargent is the Paganini of the brush, Liszt was the Paganini of the pianoforte, the greatest virtuoso that ever lived. He also was a great composer. Long before he died, he retired from the concert platform, but his fame as a pianist has not diminished, and his influence as a composer remains potent—indeed is felt more and more.

Enormous was the number of distinguished men and women who were counted among his friends. His friendship with Wagner is historic; his affair with the Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein almost so. One hesitates to call it a liaison, not because it wasn't, but because it was conducted so openly and tolerated so generally. Could Liszt, without his genius for music, have drawn to himself all the friends he did, these friendships alone would have made him famous. He saw Beethoven, knew Chopin, George Sand (otherwise Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin, Mme. Dudevant), Berlioz, Heine, Meyerbeer; pretty nearly all the great ones of the earth, in fact; and he was the father of that Cosima, aquiline of feature and keen of intellect, who brought order out of chaos in the affairs of Wagner, and, as his wife, became his accomplished and sympathetic helpmate.

Liszt's father, an amateur, began giving him instruction when he was six years old. Even without professional instruction the boy was able, when he was nine years old, to appear in public and play a difficult concerto by Ries. So great was his success that his father arranged for other concerts at Pressburg. After the second of these, several Hungarian noblemen agreed to provide an annual stipend of 600 florins for six years for Franz's further musical education. The family removing to Vienna, where, for about a year and a half, the boy took pianoforte lessons from Czerny and theory with Salieri, Beethoven heard of him, and asked to see him. At this meeting, after Franz had played, without notes and without the other instruments, Beethoven's pianoforte

trio, Op. 97 (the large one in B flat major), the master embraced and kissed him. In 1823 he was taken to Paris with a view to being placed in the Conservatoire. But although he passed his examination without difficulty, Cherubini, at that time the director of the institution and prejudiced against infant phenomena, revived a rule excluding foreigners and admission was denied him.

His success as a pianist, however, was enormous and there was the greatest demand in salons and musical circles for "le petit Litz." (As some one wrote, "the nearest Paris came to appreciating Liszt was to call him 'Litz.'") He was the friend of Chopin, of other musicians, and of painters and literary men, and the doors of the most exclusive drawing-rooms of the French capital were open to him. Paganini played in Paris in 1831. His marvellous art inspired Liszt to develop the technique of the pianoforte with as much daring as Paganini had shown in developing the capacity of the violin. Thus began those wonderful feats of virtuosity and the remarkable technical demands of his compositions, which have done so much to make the pianoforte what it is, and to bring out its full capacity as regards execution and expression.

The Countess d' Agoult, who wrote under the name of Daniel Stern, deserted her husband for Liszt and for four years lived with him in Geneva. They had three children, one of them Cosima. Two episodes in this liaison are typically French. Liszt chivalrously suggested that the lady secure a divorce and marry him, whereupon she drew herself up and replied, "The Countess d' Agoult cannot lower her-

self to become Mme. Liszt." In 1829 the countess returned to her husband, who called a family council which decided that "Liszt had acted like a perfect gentleman"—because he had paid the expenses of the ménage at Geneva, without asking the count to contribute a sou to his wife's support!

Liszt now began a triumphal tour through Europe. For ten years the world rang with his fame. He then settled down as court conductor at Weimar, which became the headquarters of the new romantic movement in Germany. Hardly a person of distinction in music or any of the other arts passed through the town without a visit to the Altenburg, to pay his respects to Liszt who lived there with the Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein. At Weimar, "Lohengrin" had its first performance; here Berlioz's works found a hearing; here everything new in music that also was meritorious was made welcome. Liszt's activity at Weimar continued until 1859, when he left there on account of the hostility displayed to the production of Cornelius's opera, "The Barber of Bagdad," and its resultant failure. He remained away from Weimar for eleven years, living for the most part in Rome, until 1870, when he was invited to conduct the Beethoven festival and re-established cordial relations with the Court. Thereafter he divided his year between Rome, Buda-Pest, where he had been made President of the new Hungarian Academy of Music, and Weimar.

If I may be permitted to quote from my "How to Appreciate Music," Liszt passed through six lives in the course of his existence—only three less than a cat. As "petit Litz" he

was the precocious child adored of Paris; later on he plunged into the early romanticism which united the devotees of various branches of art in the French capital; next came the episode with the Countess d'Agoult; then his triumphal tours through Europe; settling at Weimar, he became the centre of the modern musical movement in Europe; finally, he revolved in a cycle through Rome, Buda-Pest and Weimar, followed from place to place by a band of devotees.

Liszt's compositions for the pianoforte may be classified as follows: "Fantasies Dramatiques"; "Années de Pèlerinage"; "Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses"; the Sonata, Concertos, Études, and miscellaneous works; "Rhapsodies Hongroises"; arrangements and transcriptions from Berlioz, Beethoven, Weber, Paganini, Schubert and others.

The Études bear the dates 1827, 1839 and 1852, and they are of great importance, because being in the main elaborated editions of the same pieces, they represent the history of pianoforte technique as it developed under Liszt's own fingers. In their earliest shape when issued in 1827, they were but little different from the classical studies of Czerny and Cramer. In their latest shape they form the extreme of virtuosity. Indeed, these three editions are three giant strides in the development of pianoforte technique. Schumann called the collection "Sturm und Graus Etuden" (Studies of Storm and Dread), and expressed the opinion that there were only ten or twelve pianists living who could play them. Through Liszt's transcriptions of some of the Paganini pieces in the form of Études, which include the famous "Bell Rondo" from

one of the Paganini concertos, this piece, for example, now is far better known as a pianoforte composition than in its original form for violin.

His songs are of great beauty. They are more than songs; each is a complete musical exposition of the poem to which it is composed. The "Lorelei" and "There Was a King in Thule" are miniature music drama. In the former the river flows, the waves dash against the rock, the Lorelei lures the fisherman to his death. In the latter song, besides its dramatic force, there is masterly realism in the passage that describes the gradual sinking from sight of the golden goblet the king casts into the sea. By way of comparison, Rubinstein's setting of "Thou'rt Like unto a Flower" gives through its simplicity a rare impression of purity. Liszt, in his setting of the same poem, adds to that purity the feeling of sacredness with which the contemplation of a pure woman fills a man's heart. The "Wanderer's Night Song" simply is exquisite; and what song has more of the valuable quality of "atmosphere" than Liszt's setting of "Know'st Thou the Land"?

The "Sonata in B Minor" dedicated to Schumann is one of the few sonatas in which there is psychological unity throughout. This is due to its being in one movement; although by employing various themes both in rapid and in slow time, Liszt has given it a certain aspect of division into movements. It might well serve as a model to younger composers who think they have to write sonatas. Dannreuther, it is true, says of it that it is "a curious compound of true genius and empty rhetoric," but admits that it contains enough of genuine im-

pulse and originality in the themes of the opening section, and of suave calm in the melody of the section that stands for the slow movement, to secure the hearer's attention, Mr. Hanchett's characterization of it as one of the most masterly compositions ever put into this form—a gigantic, wholly admirable and original work—is more just.

The two pianoforte concertos (in E flat and A major) are superb works. Not only are they written with all the skill which Liszt knew so well how to apply when composing for the instrument, but with this technical perfection they also unite thought and feeling. Like the sonata, they show throughout their development the psychological unity which is so essentially modern. What the pianoforte owes to Chopin and Liszt can be summed up by saying that they were poets and thinkers who took the trouble to thoroughly understand the instrument. Because their music sounds so well on it, at least one of them, Liszt, frequently is stigmatized as a trickster of virtuosity and a charlatan, as if there were some wonderful mark of genius in writing something for one instrument that sounds better on another or may not sound as well as it ought to on any. If Liszt's pianoforte music is grateful to the player and equally grateful to the listener, it is not only because he knew how to write for the pianoforte, but because, with deep thoughts and poetic feelings, he also understood how to express them clearly and pianistically.

The "Rhapsodies Hongroises" are of such dazzling brilliancy and show off a pianist's technique to such good purpose and so brilliantly, that their real musical worth has been under-

estimated. They are full of splendid fire, vitality and passion, and their rhythmic throb is simply irresistible. As with the studies, their history is curious. At first they were merely short transcriptions of Hungarian tunes. These were elaborated and republished and canceled, and then rewritten and published again. In all there are fifteen pieces in the set, ending with the "Rakoczy March." As "Ungarische Melodien" they began to appear in 1838; as "Melodies Hongroises" in 1846; as "Rhapsodies Hongroises" in 1854. Consider that in their final form they are nearly sixty years old, yet remain the greatest pieces for the display of brilliant technique and the most grateful works for which a pianist can ask, and that at the same time they are full of admirable musical content! Because they happen to be brilliant and effective they are called trashy, whereas they owe their brilliancy and effectiveness to Liszt's own transcendent knowledge of the pianoforte. In order to be great must music be badly written for the instrument on which it is to be played?

Liszt composed two symphonies; the "Faust" and a symphony to Dante's "Divina Commedia." In both a chorus is introduced. His "symphonic poems" are an advance upon the classical symphonic form. The best known are "Les Préludes" and "Tasso, Lamento e Trionfo." In the symphonic poems Liszt makes use of the principle of the Leitmotif and introduces it into orchestral music. They are, in fact, dramatic works for orchestra, superbly instrumentated and profoundly beautiful in thought and intention.

In those charming reminiscences, William Mason's "Memories of a Musical Life," Mr. Mason writes that time and

again at Weimar he heard Liszt play, and that there is absolutely no doubt in his mind that Liszt was the greatest pianist of the nineteenth century, what the Germans call an *Erscheinung*, an epoch-making genius. Tausig said of him: "Liszt dwells alone upon a solitary mountain-top and none of us can approach him." Rubinstein said to Mr. William Steinway, in the year 1873 (I quote from Mason): "Put all the rest of us together and we would not make one Liszt." While Mr. Mason willingly acknowledges that there have been other great pianists, some of them now living, he adds: "But I must dissent from those writers who affirm that any of these can be placed upon a level with Liszt. Those who make this assertion are too young to have heard Liszt other than in his declining years, and it is unjust to compare the playing of one who has long since passed his prime with that of one who is still in it."

Edward Dannreuther, who heard Liszt play from 1863 onward, says that there was about his playing an air of improvisation and the expression of a grand and fine personality, perfect self-possession, grace, dignity and never-failing fire; that his tone was large and penetrating, but not hard, every effect being produced naturally and easily. Dannreuther adds that he has heard performances, it may be of the same pieces, by younger men, such as Rubinstein and Tausig, but that they left an impression as of Liszt at second-hand or of Liszt past his prime. "None of his contemporaries or pupils were so spontaneous, individual and convincing in their playing; and none except Tausig so infallible with their fingers and wrists."

Bear in mind that Liszt played for Beethoven, that he was a contemporary of Chopin and Schumann, that he was one of the first to throw himself heart and soul into the Wagner movement, and that death came to him while he was attending the festival performances at Bayreuth; bear in mind, I repeat, that he played for Beethoven and died after "Parsifal"; strive to appreciate the extremes of musical history and development implied by this; then remember that he remains a potent force in music—and you may be able to form some idea of his greatness.

THE LISZT PORTRAIT

THE charming portrait of Liszt, at the age of twenty-seven, forms a frontispiece appropriate to the centenary of the composer's birth and to the article on his importance as a virtuoso and composer.

Now that lithography, after long enslavement to commerce, again is being practiced as an art—and a most delicate one—it is especially interesting to note that this print is from an original lithograph, from life, made in 1838 by Josef Kriehuber, a famous Austrian artist-lithographer, to whom many celebrities considered it an honor to sit for their portraits.

As a print, this "Liszt" is vivacious, yet soft and subtle in its lines. It is a companion to the Shumann portrait published with the issue of the magazine for January, 1910. Both portraits are reproduced from the larger prints contained in the "Portrait Gallery of Great Composers" published by The Lotus Magazine Foundation.



FRANZ LISZT
IN 1838
By Joseph Kriehuber